

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

ABELL SALUTES: The Retention Program of CollegeBound: “Keeping the dream of college alive by keeping the dreamer in college”

College sophomores Travis Willett (Towson University), Natasha Fung (Frostburg State), and Andrew Williams (University of Maryland, College Park) have to consider themselves lucky. They returned for the second year of college, but they almost didn’t. The CollegeBound Foundation’s Retention Program made the difference.

The difference between dropping out after freshman year and continuing on successfully to college graduation comes about because CollegeBound retention specialists Jamie Tang or Patrick Young immediately intervene, separately or together, when there is a sign of trouble.

CollegeBound’s College Retention Program couples an award of Last Dollar Scholarship (up to \$3,000 annually) with the personal support of a retention counselor through graduation at nine Maryland colleges and universities. The program starts in June following high school graduation. CollegeBound meets with incoming students to ensure they are prepared for enrollment in the fall. CollegeBound retention specialists then visit each campus monthly to meet individually and in groups with students, as well as with key university personnel. There are e-mail and telephone check-ins as well as a 24-hour hotline for students.

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The Case for City Cyber Schools: Can online learning make a difference in Baltimore City’s “bricks and mortar” schoolhouses and beyond?

By Eileen Canzian

A PowerPoint slide is center stage as teacher Rachel Murray leads her second-grade class through a language arts lesson. *If you give a plant water, then it will grow*, the illustration says.

“What is the cause?” Murray asks her students, stressing the day’s theme. “What is the effect?”

Julie responds by typing into a chat box, while Timmy opts to answer aloud via his computer’s microphone. Miles away from their teacher’s desk in a West Philadelphia office building, they and their classmates are taking the course online.

Hard figures don’t seem to exist, but it’s clear that the past few years have seen an explosion in the number of students in the United States taking classes over the Internet. The U.S. Department of Education cites an estimate that more than a million K-12 public school students took online courses in the school year 2007-2008, up more than 40 percent from the year before.¹

The nation’s cyber scholars include failing high school students who opt to finish their education online, as well as high achievers looking for an Advanced Placement or foreign language course not available in their own secondary

school. Their classes may feature live instruction over the Internet or be a more self-guided curriculum with teacher communication via phone or e-mail, among other configurations.

Many K-8 participants, such as those in Rachel Murray’s Commonwealth Connections Academy class, are enrolled in an online school through which they take all of their courses at a computer in their home. A “learning coach,” usually a parent or other relative, works with the child on site while state-certified teachers instruct via live Webcast or video. Some inner-city parents in Philadelphia and Chicago have decided to go this route rather than send their children through dangerous neighborhoods to schools with bad reputations.

But a burgeoning movement argues that online education offers profound possibilities far beyond these niche uses. These advocates say online courses should *replace* at least some traditional instruction in many public schools — including for younger students in elementary and middle schools, and especially in poor urban areas such as inner-city Baltimore.

Online advocates

Leading champions of this view are Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb,

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provocative educational reformers who make the case in their book *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education*.

They approvingly describe the use of computers in the Dayton Academies, two Dayton, Ohio, K-8 charter schools managed by EdisonLearning (which was founded by Chubb).

The schools primarily serve low-income, African-American children.

Chubb and Moe argue that the online emphasis allows the schools to better meet the individual needs of students — while also permitting larger class sizes that save money.

“Every student, including kindergarten, now spends 60 to 90 minutes daily in large, technology-supported learning venues learning in *highly customized fashion*,” the authors write. “The venues operate very smoothly. In ‘My Learning Lab’ students work in ‘pods’ of six partitioned laptop stations per pod, with 10 pods in all—enough computers to support 60 students in the lab at a time. The students enter the lab enthusiastically, sit down at their assigned pods, and consult the assignment individually determined by their teacher based on prior diagnostics. Each student quickly logs on and begins work targeted specifically to his or her learning need. In a lab of two third-grade classes, some students will be working, with oral cues and feedback through headphones, on a reading fluency or decoding program. Others may be analyzing current events and self-assessing their comprehension via news articles written at a sixth-grade level. Others may be learning and practicing math skills electronically—gaining instructional insights not possible in a regular

classroom and receiving the additional time necessary to master them.”²

All of this is happening, the authors write, “in double-size classes of about 60 students, supported by a *single* classroom teacher.... The higher student-teacher ratios during the electronically supported instructional periods have enabled the schools to reduce the number of teachers they normally required.” The need for fewer teachers has allowed the two schools to pay higher salaries and thus attract and keep stronger educators, the authors say.³ But they also argue that by requiring fewer teachers, this model will allow education in the United States to be cheaper once the teachers’ unions — self serving and obstructionist, in the authors’ view — become less powerful.

Others eschew or at least avoid such arguments, suggesting that it simply makes sense to bring more technology into our schools to allow students to learn in a way that has become natural to many of them — and to more easily tailor instruction to meet their needs.

Marjorie Miles — a teacher and principal in Baltimore public schools for more than two decades — is now an assistant professor of education at Coppin State University and a leading local advocate for the development of online options for city students. She was instrumental in getting Matthew A. Henson Elementary to offer online summer school courses for third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students last year. The students reported each day to the school, where reading and math classes were led via the Internet by teachers at Connection Academy’s corporate headquarters on Fleet Street in Harbor East. Baltimore City teachers were at Matthew Henson to serve as the on-site coaches.

Miles says there was no significant difference between the scores of the online students and their counterparts in a traditional class,⁴ but says the four-week program was too short to draw conclusions. She remains confident that computerized learning is the best way to reach most students.

“This is how our kids are ‘wired’ now — they are wired for technology,” she says.

Kenneth Wong, chair of the education department at Brown University and director of its Urban Education Policy Program, also thinks that online courses could be a real plus for urban systems. Cities often get the least qualified teachers, he says, and could use the extra help that online resources can provide. “Teacher quality has been unevenly distributed, shortchanging the inner-city schools,” he says. Adding online courses “is going to provide additional learning opportunities for inner-city children.”

Wong points out that in many classrooms, a third of the students are capable of more advanced work, while a third need to move more slowly, and a third “are in the middle.” Teachers often aim their instruction to that middle, he says, while online courses — offering self-paced curricula and a wide range of difficulties — could give all three groups just what they need. “I think there is a case to be made in terms of more custom-oriented education that meets the needs of the children,” he says.

“This is a complete game changer,” agrees Susan Patrick, a former U.S. Department of Education official who heads the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (INACOL), a nonprofit that advocates for online education. “What technology lets you do is start to move to customized, differentiated learning.”

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Patrick notes that beyond the actual instruction, a computer-based model can make it easier to evaluate students to see where they should be placed and to monitor their progress as they make their way through online exercises.

“It could potentially transform schools in ways you would not expect,” she says. “When you start having the data for how every student is doing in their learning, then all of a sudden you can be using time differently. You can be helping the kids that need it. The brightest kids can move faster. That’s what using technology and digital learning systems allows you to do.”

Using technology

Making use of such technology will take more than simply adding to the computer equipment already found in most schools. “For the \$60 billion that has been spent on educational technology in the last decade, the average time that a student spends online in an average school is 15 minutes a week. It’s pretty shocking,” Patrick says. “Teachers need to be trained to teach online and to use digital curriculum. There are pedagogical strategies that they need to use to teach effectively online.”

What many advocates are encouraging is a move toward a “blended” or “hybrid” model in which students go to schools that feature both online and traditional instruction. Students might take some traditional face-to-face classes and others online. Or the blending could be within a course that uses both online and non-online teaching, according to definitions offered in a report on blended learning published by INACOL.⁵

The report points out that “the blending of online programs and the classroom setting has been relatively slow to develop in K-12 education.”⁶ This is partly because many online curricula

were not developed for use in blended instruction, but for distance learning, suggests author John Watson, founder of Evergreen Education Group, an online-education consulting firm.

When asked for examples of “bricks and mortar” schools that use a blended approach, advocates often cite high schools that serve students at risk of dropping out. Cincinnati’s Virtual High School, for instance, “brings students together in a physical setting during regular school hours, but students work primarily with online content while [also] having face-to-face access to teachers. The school provides an online alternative for students who need credit recovery and are having difficulty in the traditional classroom setting.”⁷

Though online classes are still a small part of secondary education, they have gained a foothold in advanced and remedial programming that Harvard maverick Clayton Christensen predicts will grow to account for half of all high school instruction in this country by 2019.⁸

Blending in K-8

A fully blended approach appears to be quite rare today in elementary or middle schools. One hopeful example is that of Rocketship Education, a nonprofit that wants to eliminate the achievement gap plaguing poor, minority children by running innovative charter schools featuring some online teaching.

Rocketship opened its first elementary in a poor Latino neighborhood in San Jose, Calif., in 2007. The 450 students of Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary spend about two hours a day getting online instruction — about 25 percent of their school day of 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. — and the rest in traditional classes, according to Rocketship CEO and co-founder John Danner.

Last year the school scored a whopping 925 — out of a possible 1,000 — on the California state scale known as

the Academic Performance Index.⁹

“Our thesis is that basic skills are the things that computers do well, and that higher-order skills are the things that teachers do well,” Danner says.

The emphasis of students’ work in the computer center is math, for which the school uses several different online curricula. Teachers select one for a student “based on how a child seems to learn well,” Danner says. He offers as an example the youngster who can learn math better through “visualization,” or visualizing quantities, rather than learning a rote computation process with rules. The point, Danner says, is “getting the right lesson in front of a child rather than the lesson that you as a teacher know how to teach.”

The computer has a role in reading instruction as well. The students read books — the old-fashioned print kind, as it happens — but get frequent online testing to check their comprehension. The advantage of the computerized testing, Danner says, is that “you get data back in real time that tells how well they are doing.” That makes it easier to place children in a traditional reading class appropriate to their reading skill.

The economics of the “learning lab,” as the computer center is called, are intriguing. Danner calls the lab “basically free.”

His explanation: When students are in the lab, they are supervised by aides, not more highly paid teachers. As for start-up, the cost of each computer has fallen to about \$350, Danner says, for a piece of equipment the school can use for three to five years. “And the kids are spending a quarter of their day on it, in a room with no teachers,” he says. “The staffing in that room is basically two folks who are overseeing 60 kids each, and they’re making 12, 13 dollars an hour.”

The result, Danner says, is that the lab costs about \$50,000 a year for hardware and curricula, and another \$50,000 for people, for a total of about \$100,000.

"If the kids were with a teacher for that time we would need five additional teachers — with salary and benefits, about \$400,000 a year in teaching costs."

So, Danner says, the lab actually saves \$300,000 a year — money the school uses in part to hire mentor teachers, called academic deans, who work with the teachers in the traditional classrooms. "It allows us to create a leadership team instead of just having a principal," he says.

And there's still money left over from the school's standard government funding, Danner says, which Rocketship is putting toward opening new schools. It has a second elementary in San Jose and will launch a third this year.

Others schools cited as blended feature a lesser reliance on technology, though their supporters say the online impact is nonetheless significant.

At San Jose Edison Academy, a K-8 charter school in West Covina, Calif., managed by EdisonLearning, some seventh graders who are ready for eighth-grade algebra are taking that course online. Some advanced eighth graders are in the same fashion taking geometry. "We don't have the money to bring in an extra math teacher. What I do have is someone who can oversee [the two classes] in a computer lab," says principal Denise Patton.

In the morning, before school starts, students have the option of coming in early to study a foreign language at the computer. And, Patton says, an online program called Achieve3000 plays an important role in tailoring instruction in traditionally taught classes such as social studies. If a fourth-grade class is assigned to read an article about, say, the Gold Rush, each student will get an online version geared to his or her reading ability — a longer article written at an eighth-grade level for advanced readers, a shorter version with simpler language

for students who struggle with reading.

"The content is covered for both," Patton says. "For those kids who don't have computers at home, we can print out the article and the questions so they are not at a disadvantage."

The Dayton Academies mentioned earlier still make considerable use of computers to enhance traditional instruction for elementary and middle school students, but no classes are actually taught online, according to Edison officials. The computer lab is used to enhance traditionally taught classes with supplemental work.

Learning at home

A far different approach described by some as blended has students doing most of their learning at home, though those who use this model point out it should not be called home schooling. They note that students are enrolled in an online academy with teachers, tests, graded work — and the scrutiny of state regulators, who are checking to see if the school has made adequate yearly progress.

The Chicago Virtual Charter School opened in 2006, when U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan was CEO of Chicago's school system. Students in grades K-8 (there's also a high school) go to their school's rented building once a week for half a day to work with teachers — and other students — face to face. The rest of the time, they are educated at home under the eyes of a parent or other learning coach who works with the child as she makes her way through a curriculum from the company K12 Inc. of Herndon, Va., according to head of school Bruce Law. More than half of the students are from low-income families, Law says, and two-thirds are African American. The school, which is publicly funded, provides computers and pays for Internet access.

Law says many of the parents are advocates of home schooling, while oth-

ers are driven by concerns about the quality of their neighborhood school and the safety of sending their children there. The virtual school's model can work well for disadvantaged children, he says, but it is not for every family.

"It is a challenge in an urban environment for parents to be able to be an effective learning coach because of the academic skills required of the adult. The curriculum is not like a video game where you can just sit a child in a corner and say, 'Go at it.' It actually requires instruction," Law says.

"So we have teachers who support learning coaches; we have teachers who can teach the material if necessary."

In Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth Connections Academy is a publicly funded charter that serves students from all over the state. Though it has no required face-to-face instruction, the school opened its Philadelphia office expressly to allow inner-city families to bring their child for in-person remedial work.

But mainly, in grades K-5, students are taught online by a teacher who oversees a class of 30 to 40 students. The teacher leads some live classes via Webcast as well as monitors a student's progress through online curricula. At least once every two weeks, the teacher must talk by phone with the student and also his learning coach, according to elementary principal Susan E. Shubert. Shubert says the model requires a parent or other relative who is vigilant, not necessarily a college grad.

"We definitely have a lot of parents who aren't highly educated and they do fine," Shubert says. "The most important thing is being a dedicated learning coach." Students in grades six through 12 work much more independently, Connections officials say, interacting directly with their teachers and requiring little if any support from an adult at home.

Almost no research

Parents and school districts deciding what to do about all this will find very little scientific evidence to guide them. In a report published last year, U.S. Department of Education researchers described their search for rigorous studies evaluating the effectiveness of online schooling for K-12. They found just five studies worthy of consideration.

The studies looked at eighth-grade social studies classes, eighth and ninth graders taking algebra I, middle school students taking Spanish, fifth-grade science students in Taiwan, and elementary-age students in special education classes. The five studies had, among them, seven findings.

"Three of the K-12 studies had significant effects favoring a blended learning condition, one had a significant negative effect favoring face-to-face instruction, and three... did not attain statistical significance," the report says.¹⁰

(The eighth-grade social studies research involved students in two Maryland school districts, which were not named in the study, published in 2005. It looked at the performance of students whose teachers used interactive "field trips," created by Maryland Public Television, as part of their units on slavery and the Underground Railroad compared with students who did not use the online tools. The study found "a small effect ... favoring the online" group.)¹¹

Overall, the federal researchers concluded that "the number of K-12 studies is too small to warrant much confidence" in conclusions favoring online education for this age group.¹²

While there are few studies contrasting the performance of students getting online instruction versus those taught traditionally, advocates of e-schooling point to test results they say are promising.

Connections Academy officials cite

gains made by elementary and middle school students that scored in the bottom quartile on Pennsylvania state reading and math tests. Of students who entered Connections reading at the "basic" level, more than half moved up to "advanced" or "proficient" after just one year in the online school. More than a quarter of "basic" math students made similar gains.¹³

A smaller percentage of students who enrolled in Connections with scores of "below basic" moved up at least one level on the state tests after a year.¹⁴

And in California, Santa Clara County charter schools director Lucretia Peebles cites the "phenomenal achievement" of students at Rocketship Mateo Sheedy. Peebles says the students' online work in the learning lab appears to be an important part of the school's success. "I think it does help students to focus right in on what they need to increase their skills and their learning," Peebles says.

But in Dayton, one of the Edison schools cited in *Liberating Learning* gets a poor rating from state education officials. Dayton Academy failed to make adequate yearly progress last school year and is on "academic watch," according to the Ohio State Department of Education.

Just 41 percent of Dayton Academy's third graders scored at or above proficient in reading and 48 percent in math. In contrast, third-grade scores for the Dayton district as a whole were more than 55 percent for reading and 54 percent for math. Statewide, the average was more than 77 percent for reading and 81 percent for math. (The academy's sister school, Dayton View Academy, had better scores and was listed as showing "continuous improvement.")¹⁵

Maryland and Baltimore

Compared with other states, Maryland is doing very little to promote online educational opportunities of any

kind for students in K-12. Neighbors Pennsylvania and Virginia are among 25 states that allow for full-time virtual charter schools. Maryland does not. Maryland is among the 35 states that allow students to take some courses online.¹⁶ But relatively few Maryland students do so, according to Robert Cole of the Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities Program.

The program, created by the General Assembly in 2002, makes online high school level courses available to students. Last year, the state counted 715 enrollments in those classes. Cole estimates there were another 200 to 400 online enrollments through local school systems – suggesting, he says, that fewer than 1,200 public school students took an entire course online. More than 800,000 K-12 students attended public school in Maryland last year, according to the state education department.

Similarly, relatively little is happening within the Baltimore City public school system to explore the possibilities of online learning. "I agree with you there is not much of it going on. That is an accurate assessment," says Laura Weeldreyer, deputy chief of staff to schools chief Andrés A. Alonso.

"Online learning has not emerged as a top priority," Weeldreyer says, "but I don't think that's because we're opposed to it."

She notes that city principals have a great deal of authority these days and could choose to add some online instruction. "A principal could just do it," she says. But, she adds, "many of the principals are not comfortable with technology, so it is not happening."

Administration officials point to Cross Country Elementary Middle and Mount Washington Elementary as two schools where principals have used their authority over their budgets to purchase online programming. At Cross Country, an online math program is being used to provide tutoring help for about 100

students, while at Mount Washington, about 25 students are getting a gifted and talented course online, according to Linda Eberhart, the system's director of teaching and learning.

Eberhart also says that this year, about 60 elementary and middle schools have been able to use a donated remedial math program that allows students who need extra help to practice their skills online.

Beyond that, the school system did allow the summer-school experiment at Matthew Henson. And the city's charter review committee has expressed interest in City Prep, a proposed charter for grades six to 12 that would use an online curriculum, according to the charter school applicant.

Tom Vander Ark, a self-described "education entrepreneur" who is behind CityPrep, says the charter would be a "bricks and mortar" school with "a full complement of certified teachers." Students would be in a classroom, but "doing a good bit of their learning online," Vander Ark says. His proposal to open the school this fall was not approved, but he says that he will revise the plan and try again.

In a system with plenty of children who might be candidates for an alternative method of learning – over-aged middle schoolers is a group often cited – one might expect much more discussion of online possibilities.

But many educators in a position of authority in the city are "digital dinosaurs," in the words of one district insider who asked not to be identified. "Some principals' visible discomfort in using a computer is astounding," this source says.

One also hears arguments that appear to be ill-informed or worse. Officials talk of technology that did not live up to its promises, but go on to describe out-

dated products that came out more than a decade ago.

Then there's this: "People in decision-making positions feel like poor, African-American children are not going to do well interacting with a computer," says a system official who asked not to be named. The idea may be that children deserve in-person attention, but the argument is nonetheless shocking.

Weeldreyer, the deputy chief of staff, says that if the system were to try to do more online, discussions with the teachers' union likely would be necessary. "I can envision scenarios where the union might protest that technology is replacing teachers," she says. But she acknowledges that without specific proposals to discuss, there's no way to know. "If we were to promote more

PLUGGING IN: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CYBER LEARNING IN BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Technology is not a panacea, but it can be a critical part of a multi-tiered strategy to increase achievement in Baltimore City. In particular, cyber learning can meet the targeted needs of students with customized and differentiated instruction that is often difficult to deliver in the traditional classroom. Because research is scant, the next phase of online learning will require strategic experimentation with careful assessment. Nevertheless, new approaches are clearly needed for struggling students in Baltimore City as well as those who are the highest performing.

Below are several scenarios where cyber learning may be part of the solution in Baltimore City public schools.

- **Develop "blended" or "hybrid" schools that integrate both online and traditional teaching in the "bricks and mortar" schoolhouse**
 - Solicit charter and transformation schools that make significant use of online teaching and allow interested families opportunities to choose these schools
 - Provide incentives and support to all principals to add or expand the use of online instruction
- **Use online learning to expand access to rigorous coursework for high-performing students**
 - Gifted and talented enrichment programs for children in elementary and middle schools
 - Advanced Placement (AP) or upper-level foreign language courses in high schools
- **Integrate individualized cyber-learning curricula in special education classrooms**
- **Provide a full-time, virtual-learning program to serve students outside school buildings, particularly those in the Home and Hospital program, on long-term suspension, or home-bound by parental choice**
- **Re-engage older, at-risk students using cyber-learning options**
 - Online high school coursework – original credit or credit recovery
 - Creative uses of technology for over-aged students, out-of-school youth, or those connected with the juvenile justice program

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opportunities for online learning, it would be in collaboration with the teachers' union," she says.

Trying something new

Martin West, an assistant professor of education at Harvard who studies the effectiveness of reform strategies, describes himself as "an agnostic" on the question of whether school systems should be doing more with online curriculum.

"We don't have a huge amount of very rigorous research on the relative effectiveness of online education versus traditional education," he says. "We do not have a strong base of evidence that says this is a better way of doing things."

He adds: "But there is plenty of evidence that we need to be thinking of new ways of doing things in public education. So what's really important is to begin experimenting with some of these ideas so that they can be evaluated."

The way to do that, West says, is for school systems to encourage the development of blended charter schools so that parents interested in this approach for their children can try it.

At Coppin, Marjorie Miles thinks that's exactly what the Baltimore City school system ought to be doing. After years of trying to reach students who aren't making it in schools as we know them, she believes blended charters could be just what's needed. Such schools might engage students who aren't interested, she says, and help others who find traditional instruction too fast – or too slow – for their abilities.

But Miles does not see a receptive audience among education leaders for trying to do more online. "I think the educational establishment in Maryland is afraid of this," she says. She thinks that is partly because "administrators don't know enough about it to embrace it..."

"People tend to be afraid of things they don't know about," she says.

Eileen Canzian was for many years a reporter and editor at The Baltimore Sun. She expects to teach in Baltimore this fall as part of the Teach for America program.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹² U.S. Department of Education Meta-Analysis, xv.
- ¹³ Connections Academy, LLC (2008), Internal Analysis Based on Data from Pennsylvania Department of Education/Pennsylvania System of Student Assessment.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ohio State Department of Education Online Report Card at ilrc.ode.state.oh.us.
- ¹⁶ Susan Patrick, President and CEO, International Association for K-12 Online Learning, interview, February 2010.

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The cohort regroups mid-year in Baltimore and over the summer of each school year. Retention specialists work closely with students and student-support officers at each campus to address problems of college completion.

Since 1988, the CollegeBound Foundation has enabled numerous Baltimore City public high school students to attend college by providing both college advising and financial aid in 22 Baltimore City public high schools, and has served 20,000 of the city's most disadvantaged high school students. Dr. Craig Spilman, executive director of CollegeBound, says, "These young people dream about a college education. Sometimes that dream is threatened. We keep their dream alive by keeping the dreamer in college."

While significant numbers of Baltimore City students are accepted into college, National Student Clearinghouse college verification data show that less than 50 percent enroll in college immediately after high school graduation. Research consistently confirms that the failure to secure college funding is the overwhelming barrier to college enrollment for inner-city kids. The data also reveal that only one in 10 Baltimore City high school graduates earn a college degree within six years of graduating from high school. CollegeBound set out to meet this challenge by employing college-retention strategies designed to increase the college-graduation rates of Baltimore City public high school students. CollegeBound hypothesized that the mix of Last Dollar Grant funding and college-retention interventions in partnership with the Maryland universities would enable more students to complete college.

In its quest, CollegeBound had encouraging data from the start. Available studies made clear that programs providing counseling on personal

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lifestyle-adjustment problems along with the traditional financial support have reduced college dropout rates. In fall 2006, with these data and a two-year grant of \$173,966 from The Abell Foundation, CollegeBound initiated a College Retention Program at nine Maryland colleges and universities beginning with 58 recipients of CollegeBound's Last Dollar Grants. In its fourth year, there are now four cohorts and 230 students participating in the College Retention Program on eight Maryland public university campuses and at Stevenson University.

Freshman to sophomore college-persistence rates for the first three cohorts of students in the Retention Program average 87 percent, versus the average of 78 percent of previous Last Dollar Grant award recipients who did not receive the retention services. This compares favorably to freshman-to-sophomore retention rates of 73 percent nationally and 80 percent in Maryland. For African-Americans students in Maryland, the retention rate is 70 percent. An important footnote: College-continuation rates (students who remain enrolled in college, but transfer to a different college) for retention-program students averaged 94 percent from freshman to sophomore year. All freshmen in the Retention Program's fourth cohort (high school class of 2009) are currently re-enrolled in the spring semester.

Three CollegeBound retention students from Baltimore City tell their stories:

Natasha Fung, Frostburg State: "The transition from high school to college was a tough one for me. I came from Dr. Samuel L. Banks High School and was not prepared for what was to come my way. I didn't have any idea on how to study, how much time to spend on work,

or where to start. I was overwhelmed. CollegeBound visits our school very often to check on the progress of the students. I feel the visitation is necessary because without it I would have probably fallen back into bad habits, and flunked out of college. CollegeBound gives me the support I need, financially, and also just when I need someone to talk to about how I am feeling about some of the classes I am currently enrolled in. At one point during my second semester at Frostburg, I felt like giving up, but CollegeBound was there to encourage me to use the services at the school to take full advantage of my education. Now I am enrolled in Student Support Services, which offers help with study skills and note taking. Without CollegeBound, I feel I wouldn't have received that extra push I needed to be successful academically."

Andrew Williams, University of Maryland, College Park: "My experience with college has been an interesting one to say the least. I started out as an engineering major at the University of Maryland. I was progressing more slowly than I would have liked and was struggling with the aerospace program. The previous retention specialist, Daniel Russell, had been in contact with me and I spoke with him about the possibility of either changing my major or leaving the university for another location. I attended CCBC Essex (Community College of Baltimore County) from the summer of 2008 to the fall taking engineering classes. But the problem wasn't that engineering was too difficult, but I wasn't interested in it as much as I thought. So I changed my major to geology and returned to the University of Maryland. Geology is something I am much more interested in. The CollegeBound Foundation has been an immeasurable support, both financially and socially. The students and the retention specialists are like a family."

Travis Willett, Towson University: "CollegeBound helped me become a successful student in many ways. First, instead of just letting me do enough to get by, they persuaded me to do my very best in everything that comes my way. In addition, they provided me with counseling that led me to the tutoring center for help with my math class. Before I had the benefit of CollegeBound, I would try to do my math by myself. CollegeBound also gives me inspiration to find an alternative route on life, steering me in the right direction to find resources that might be available to me along my career path. For example, when I began college I was interested in computers and art. But I was struggling with math and I couldn't move to the computer classes that I really wanted without passing the math-class prerequisites. Even though I struggled with college for my first two years, CollegeBound was always there as my support. I could call Mr. Young or Mrs. Tang at anytime for advice or about any concerns. The CollegeBound Foundation has been my personal advising group from the beginning of school, and will continue to be my support until I finish."

The Abell Foundation salutes the Retention Program of CollegeBound, executive director Dr. Craig Spilman, program director Jimmy Tadlock, scholarship coordinator Jamie Crouse, and college retention specialists Patrick Young and Jamie Tang—"who keep the dream of college alive by keeping the dreamers in college."